Agatha Christie (1890-1976)

- **Dame Agatha Mary Clarissa Christie**, Lady Mallowan
- **Born**: Agatha Mary Clarissa Miller
  15 September 1890
  Torquay, Devon, England
- **Died:** 12 January 1976 (aged 85)
  Winterbrook House, Wallingford, Oxfordshire, England
- Pen name: Mary Westmacott
- Literary movement: **Golden Age of Detective Fiction**

(The Golden Age of Detective Fiction was an era of classic murder mystery novels of similar patterns and styles, predominantly in the 1920s and 1930s.

The Golden Age proper is, in practice, usually taken to refer to a type of fiction which was predominant in the 1920s and 1930s but had been written since at least 1911 and is still being written today. In his history of the detective story, Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel, the author Julian Symons heads two chapters devoted to the Golden Age as "the Twenties" and "the Thirties". Symons notes that Philip Van Doren Stern's article, "The Case of the Corpse in the Blind Alley" (1941) "could serve ... as an obituary for the Golden Age."

Most of the authors of the Golden Age were British: Margery Allingham (1904–1966), Anthony Berkeley (aka Francis Iles, 1893–1971), Nicholas Blake (1904–1972), G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936), Dame Agatha Christie (1890–1976), Edmund Crispin (1921–1978), Freeman Wills Crofts (1879–1957), R. Austin Freeman (1862–1943), Joseph Jefferson Farjeon (1883–1955), Cyril Hare (1900–1958), Georgette Heyer (1902–1974), Anne Hocking (1890–1966), Michael Innes (1906–1993), Msgr. Ronald Knox (1888–1957), E. C. R. Lorac (1894–1958), Philip MacDonald (1900–1980), Gladys Mitchell (1901–1983), John Rhode (1884–1964), Dorothy L. Sayers (1893–1957), Josephine Tey (1896–1952), Patricia Wentworth (1877-1961), Henry Wade (1887–1969), and many more. Dame Ngaio Marsh (1895–1982), was a New Zealander but was also British, as was her detective Roderick Alleyn. Georges Simenon was from Belgium and wrote in French; his detective, Jules Maigret, was a Frenchman. Some writers, such as Mary Roberts Rinehart, S. S. Van Dine, Earl Derr Biggers, John Dickson Carr, Ellery Queen, Erle Stanley Gardner and Elizabeth Daly, were American but had similar styles. Others, such as Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and James M. Cain, had a more hard-boiled, American style.

The Queens of Crime is a term for authors Christie, Sayers, Allingham and Marsh.)

- **Notable works:**
  - Creation of characters Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple
  - Murder on the Orient Express
  - The Murder of Roger Ackroyd
  - Death on the Nile
  - The Murder at the Vicarage
  - Partners in Crime
  - The A.B.C. Murders
  - And Then There Were None
  - The Mousetrap

- English writer known for her 66 detective novels and 14 short story collections, particularly those revolving around fictional detectives Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple.
- She also wrote the world's longest-running play, The Mousetrap, which was performed in the West End from 1952 to 2020, as well as six novels under the pseudonym Mary Westmacott.
- Guinness World Records lists Christie as the best-selling fiction writer of all time, her novels having sold more than two billion copies.
- According to Index Translationum, she remains the most-translated individual author. Her novel And Then There Were None is one of the top-selling books of all time, with approximately 100 million copies sold.
- Christie's stage play The Mousetrap holds the world record for the longest initial run. It opened at the Ambassadors Theatre in the West End of London on 25 November 1952, and by September 2018 there had been more than 27,500 performances. The play was closed down in March 2020 because of the coronavirus pandemic.
- In September 2015, And Then There Were None was named the "World's Favourite Christie" in a vote sponsored by the author's estate.
- More than 30 feature films are based on her work.
- In April 1901, aged 10, she wrote her first poem, "The Cow Slip".
- Christie had long been a fan of detective novels, having enjoyed Wilkie Collins's The Woman in White and The Moonstone, and Arthur Conan Doyle's early Sherlock Holmes stories.
- She wrote her first detective novel, The Mysterious Affair at Styles, in 1916. It featured Hercule Poirot, a former Belgian police officer with "magnificent moustaches" and a head "exactly the shape of an egg", who had taken refuge in Britain after Germany invaded Belgium. Christie's inspiration for the character came from Belgian refugees living in Torquay, and the Belgian soldiers she helped to treat as a volunteer nurse during the First World War. It was published in 1920.
- Disappearance 1926 : The disappearance quickly became a news story, as the press sought to satisfy their readers' "hunger for sensation, disaster, and scandal". Home Secretary William Joynson-Hicks pressured police, and a newspaper offered a £100 reward (approximately equivalent to £6,000 in 2020). More than a thousand police officers, 15,000 volunteers, and several aeroplanes searched the rural landscape. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle gave a spirit medium one of Christie's gloves to find her.Christie's disappearance was featured on the front page of The New York Times. Despite the extensive manhunt, she was not found for another 10 days. On 14 December 1926, she was located at the Swan Hydropathic Hotel in Harrogate, Yorkshire, 184 miles (296 km) north of her home in Sunningdale, registered as Mrs Tressa Neele (the surname of her husband's lover) from "Capetown S.A." (South Africa).
- In her autobiography, Christie wrote, "So, after illness, came sorrow, despair and heartbreak. There is no need to dwell on it."
- The British intelligence agency MI5 investigated Christie after a character called Major Bletchley appeared in her 1941 thriller N or M?, which was about a hunt for a pair of deadly fifth columnists in wartime England. MI5 was concerned that Christie had a spy in Britain's top-secret codebreaking centre, Bletchley Park. The agency's fears were allayed when Christie told her friend, the codebreaker Dilly Knox, "I was stuck there on my way by train from Oxford to London and took revenge by giving the name to one of my least lovable characters."
- Christie was elected a fellow of the *Royal Society of Literature in 1950*. In honour of her many literary works, Christie was appointed *Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in the 1956 New Year Honours.* She *was co-president of the Detection Club from 1958 to her death in 1976.* In *1961, she was awarded an honorary Doctor of Literature degree by the University of*

Exeter. In the *1971 New Year Honours, she was promoted to Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire (DBE),* three years after her husband had been knighted for his archaeological work. After her husband's knighthood, Christie could also be styled *Lady Mallowan.*

- **Detection Club:** The Detection Club was formed in 1930 by a group of British mystery writers, including Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Ronald Knox, Freeman Wills Crofts, Arthur Morrison, Hugh Walpole, John Rhode, Jessie Rickard, Baroness Emma Orczy, R. Austin Freeman, G. D. H. Cole, Margaret Cole, E. C. Bentley, Henry Wade, Constance Lindsay Taylor and H. C. Bailey. Anthony Berkeley was instrumental in setting up the club, and the first president was G. K. Chesterton. There was a fanciful initiation ritual with an oath probably written by either Chesterton or Sayers, and the club held regular dinner meetings in London.

  The oath:

  Do you promise that your detectives shall well and truly detect the crimes presented to them using those wits which it may please you to bestow upon them and not placing reliance on nor making use of Divine Revelation, Feminine Intuition, Mumbo Jumbo, Jiggery-Pokery, Coincidence, or Act of God?

  - **Presidents**
    - G. K. Chesterton (1930–1936)
    - E. C. Bentley (1936–1949)
    - Dorothy L. Sayers (1949–1957)
    - Agatha Christie (1957–1976)
    - Lord Gorell (1957–1963)
    - Julian Symons (1976–1985)
    - H. R. F. Keating (1985–2000)
    - Simon Brett (2000–2015)
    - Martin Edwards (2015–)
  - Lord Gorell shared the presidency with Agatha Christie, who only agreed to accept the role if a co-president was appointed to conduct the club's proceedings.

- In 1946, Christie said of herself: "My chief dislikes are crowds, loud noises, gramophones and cinemas. I dislike the taste of alcohol and do not like smoking. I do like sun, sea, flowers, travelling, strange foods, sports, concerts, theatres, pianos, and doing embroidery."
- Christie sold an estimated 300 million books during her lifetime. At the time of her death in 1976, "she was the best-selling novelist in history."

- **<u>Works:</u>**
- **Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple**:
  - Christie's first published book, The Mysterious Affair at Styles, was released in 1920 and introduced the detective Hercule Poirot, who appeared in 33 of her novels and more than 50 short stories.
  - Over the years, Christie grew tired of Poirot, much as Conan Doyle did with Sherlock Holmes.
  - Miss Jane Marple was introduced in a series of short stories that began publication in December 1927 and were subsequently collected under the title The Thirteen Problems.
  - Marple appeared in 12 novels and 20 stories.
  - During the Second World War, Christie wrote two novels, Curtain and Sleeping Murder, featuring Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple, respectively.
  - Christie never wrote a novel or short story featuring both Poirot and Miss Marple.

- **Formula and plot devices**
  - Christie has been called the "Duchess of Death", the "Mistress of Mystery", and the "Queen of Crime".
  - According to Hannah, "At the start of each novel, she shows us an apparently impossible situation and we go mad wondering 'How can this be happening?' Then, slowly, she reveals how the impossible is not only possible but the only thing that could have happened."
  - She developed her storytelling techniques during what has been called the "Golden Age" of detective fiction. Author Dilys Winn called Christie "the doyenne of Coziness", a sub-genre which "featured a small village setting, a hero with faintly aristocratic family connections, a plethora of red herrings and a tendency to commit homicide with sterling silver letter openers and poisons imported from Paraguay".
  - According to crime writer P. D. James, Christie was prone to making the unlikeliest character the guilty party. Alert readers could sometimes identify the culprit by identifying the least likely suspect. Christie mocked this insight in her foreword to Cards on the Table: "Spot the person least likely to have committed the crime and in nine times out of ten your task is finished. Since I do not want my faithful readers to fling away this book in disgust, I prefer to warn them beforehand that this is not that kind of book."
  - In 2013, the 600 members of the Crime Writers' Association chose The Murder of Roger Ackroyd as "the best whodunit ... ever written". (Whodunit: A whodunit or whodunnit (a colloquial elision of "Who [has] done it?") is a complex, plot-driven variety of a detective story in which the puzzle regarding who committed the crime is the main focus. The reader or viewer is provided with the clues from which the identity of the perpetrator may be deduced before the story provides the revelation itself at its climax. The investigation is usually conducted by an eccentric, amateur, or semi-professional detective. This narrative development has been seen as a form of comedy in which order is restored to a threatened social calm.)
  - Author Julian Symons observed, "In an obvious sense, the book fits within the conventions ... The setting is a village deep within the English countryside, Roger Ackroyd dies in his study; there is a butler who behaves suspiciously ... Every successful detective story in this period involved a deceit practised upon the reader, and here the trick is the highly original one of making the murderer the local doctor, who tells the story and acts as Poirot's Watson."
    Critic Sutherland Scott stated, *"If Agatha Christie had made no other contribution to the literature of detective fiction she would still deserve our grateful thanks"* for writing this novel.
  - On Desert Island Discs in 2007, Brian Aldiss said Christie had told him she wrote her books up to the last chapter, then decided who the most unlikely suspect was, after which she would go back and make the necessary changes to "frame" that person. Based upon a study of her working notebooks, Curran describes how Christie would first create a cast of characters, choose a setting, and then produce a list of scenes in which specific clues would be revealed; the order of scenes would be revised as she developed her plot. Of necessity, the murderer had to be known to the author before the sequence could be finalised and she began to type or dictate the first draft of her novel. Much of the work, particularly dialogue, was done in her head before she put it on paper.
  - In September 2015, to mark her 125th birthday, And Then There Were None was named the "World's Favourite Christie" in a vote sponsored by the author's estate.

- She is also the first female playwright to have three plays running simultaneously in London's West End: The Mousetrap, Witness for the Prosecution and Spider's Web.
- Christie said, "Plays are much easier to write than books, because you can see them in your mind's eye, you are not hampered by all that description which clogs you so terribly in a book and stops you from getting on with what's happening."

- **<u>Titles:</u>**

  Many of Christie's works from 1940 onward have titles drawn from literature, with the original context of the title typically printed as an epigraph.

  The inspirations for some of Christie's titles include:

- William Shakespeare's works: Sad Cypress, By the Pricking of My Thumbs, There is a Tide ..., Absent in the Spring, and The Mousetrap, for example. Osborne notes that "Shakespeare is the writer most quoted in the works of Agatha Christie";
- The Bible: Evil Under the Sun, The Burden, and The Pale Horse;
- Other works of literature: The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side (from Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott"), The Moving Finger (from Edward FitzGerald's translation of the Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám), The Rose and the Yew Tree (from T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets), Postern of Fate (from James Elroy Flecker's "Gates of Damascus"), Endless Night (from William Blake's "Auguries of Innocence"), N or M? (from the Book of Common Prayer), and Come, Tell Me How You Live (from Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking-Glass).

Christie biographer Gillian Gill said, "Christie's writing has the sparseness, the directness, the narrative pace, and the universal appeal of the fairy story, and it is perhaps as modern fairy stories for grown-up children that Christie's novels succeed. Reflecting a juxtaposition of innocence and horror, numerous Christie titles were drawn from well-known children's nursery rhymes: And Then There Were None (from "Ten Little Niggers"), One, Two, Buckle My Shoe (from "One, Two, Buckle My Shoe"), Five Little Pigs (from "This Little Piggy"), Crooked House (from "There Was a Crooked Man"), A Pocket Full of Rye (from "Sing a Song of Sixpence"), Hickory Dickory Dock (from "Hickory Dickory Dock"), and Three Blind Mice (from "Three Blind Mice").

- Christie is regularly referred to as the "Queen of Crime" or "Queen of Mystery", and is considered a master of suspense, plotting, and characterisation.
- In her prime, Christie was rarely out of the bestseller list. She was the first crime writer to have 100,000 copies of 10 of her titles published by Penguin on the same day in 1948. As of 2018, Guinness World Records listed Christie as the best-selling fiction writer of all time. As of 2020, her novels had sold more than two billion copies in 44 languages. Half the sales are of English-language editions, and half are translations. According to Index Translationum, as of 2020, she was the most-translated individual author. Christie is one of the most-borrowed authors in UK libraries. She is also UK's best-selling spoken-book author. In 2002, 117,696 Christie audiobooks were sold, in comparison to 97,755 for J. K. Rowling, 78,770 for Roald Dahl and 75,841 for J. R. R. Tolkien. In 2015 the Christie estate claimed And Then There Were None was "the best-selling crime novel of all time", with approximately 100 million sales, also making it one of the highest-selling books of all time. More than two million copies of her books were sold in English in 2020.

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